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THE “RENOVATED” POETRY OF THEOBALD MVUNGI AND SAID AHMED MOHAMED: ON MECHANISMS OF TRANSFORMATION OF TRADITIONAL SWAHILI VERSE

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Contemporary Swahili poetry is developing according to three main trends. The followers of the first trend – the so called “traditionalists” – stick to classic forms of old Swahili poetry. Following the Swahili canon of versification, traditionalists continue to be within the limits of two main genres of old Swahili literature – *tendi* (long poems) and *mashairi* (moderate lyrics and philosophical verses). *Utendi* has its own structure: a strophe (*ubeti*, pl. *beti*) normally consists of 4 lines (*mistari*, sing. *mstari*), each of which contains 8 (sometimes 11) syllables which form a specific meter (*mizani*). The last syllables of the first three lines are similar and form the rhyme (*vina*); the last syllable of the forth line differs from them – this syllable is called *kikomo*.

Ex.1 *Ni ye-ye a-lo-dhu-lu-ki*
Du-ni-a ku-i-mi-li-ki
A-me-u-mba kwa ma-la-ki
Vi-u-mbe vi-me-e-ne-ya

Yeye ni Mwenye uwezo
Kwa kila uwelekezo
Kwake sifanyi ubezo
Ila namnyenyeke-ya

M.S. Khatib, *Utenzi wa Ukombozi wa Zanzibar* (Wamitila 2003:335)

Moreover, the *kikomo* of each strophe should be the same; this effect makes the reader remember the main idea, the point of the verse. Usually this works very well in didactic poetry.

In *mashairi* a line usually consists of 16 syllables, so that it forms two parts (*vipande*) of a line with a caesura after the first *kipande*. Here the last (8th) syllable of each *kipande* forms a rhyme, but the last line differs sometimes as well. For *mashairi* and *tendi* it is common to shorten word forms in order to adapt them to *mizani* (e.g. *usinambie* instead of *usiniambie*).

Ex.2 *Na-ju-a wa-vu-mi-li-vu / we-nye sa-bu-ri m-swa-no,*
We-nye cha-gu-a wa-gi-vu, / wa-kwe-pa-o m-go-nga-no,
We-pe-si wa u-si-ki-vu / wa-je-nzi wa ta-nga-ma-no
Ja-po ni wa-vu-mi-li-vu, / ke-e ba-do hu-la mbo-vu.

“*Mvumilivu*” (Mochiwa 1988)

Today the followers of classic genres rarely use *tendi*, which are large epic poems (usually they can consist of 300-900 strophes), preferring short form – *mashairi*, poetic dialog *ngonjera* (written in *mashairi* form) and also mixed forms. The Kenyan poet Benjamin Magawa, for example, in his volume “*Insha na mashairi*” unites these two genres. It is hard to say why authors loose interest in *tendi*, which were very popular among writers. We may just suppose that under conditions of swift social, cultural and political development of the continent dur-

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ing the last third of the 20th century, a change occurred as well in East African literature, where after long predominance of traditional forms and genres and canons, in which sameness intrigues and typical characters appear, novel forms like the parabolic novel, the postmodern novel and drama appeared. The change effected poetry as well: short form turned out to be more adapted to suit these sudden changes, echoing the ideas and the attitudes of a new generation in Africa. Besides that, short poetic forms let an author express his own attitude towards the subject of his writing, his individual feeling, emotions, making the whole verse more subjective. An epic form such as the *utendi* is not very suitable for that, as it sticks to events of great importance, to common rules of moral and takes a more objective perspective. In Swahili poetry foregoing sudden changes were marked by the appearance of a group of young authors on the poetic stage in the 1970s, who gave a dare to tradition. Their venture radically changed the character of Swahili literature, marking the appearance of the second trend of Swahili poetry, the “new” or “modernistic” poetry.

One of the pioneers of Swahili “modernism” in poetry became the Tanzanian author Euphrase Kezilahabi. “*Tukivipitia aghalabu vitabu vyote vya mashairi ya Kiswahili vilivyopigwa chapa mpaka hii leo*, - wrote Tanzanian critic Farouk Topan, - *tutaona kwamba mashairi hayo yanafuata kanuni za kishairi...Kezilahabi anaufuata mtindo mpya wa kuandika mashairi ya Kiswahili* (Topan 1974:vii). In the introduction to his first volume of poems “Kichomi” Kezilahabi utters a kind of worry of being misunderstood by his elder colleagues: “*Huenda msomaji alizoea kusoma mashairi ya mapokeo, yaani mashairi yafuatayo kanuni k.m. mizani, vina n.k., akashangaa kuona mashairi ya aina hii yanatokea katika ushairi wa Kiswahili; na labda huenda akayatupa pembeni na kusema haya si mashairi, maana hayawezi kuimbika, hayana vina n.k....*” For instance, this is one of his typical verses:

*Mtu ye yote akiniuliza
Kwa nini vina mizani
Situmii na mistari na
Beti sitoshelezi.
Nitamwambia: Rafiki
Kuna njia nyingi za kwenda
Bustanini.
Lakini kama mtu yule yule
Kunizoa akiendelea na kuniambia
Njia niliyotumia ni mbaya,
Nitamwambia:
Rafiki, twende nyumbani kwangu
Kwa mguu, na nyumbani kwangu
Tukifika jaribu kunifunza
Kutembea.*

“*Utangulizi*” (Kezilahabi 1974)

Actually Kezilahabi and his followers were confronted with open attacks from traditionalists. And many years had to pass until their verses were regarded as “Swahili poetry”.

One of the most promising Swahili modernists in poetry became the contemporary Kenyan poet Kithaka wa Mberia. The experiment is the basic principle of his poetic manner. Being a

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Swahili teacher and the head of the department of linguistics of the University of Nairobi, it is not a coincidence that Mberia uses a new form of Swahili by which we do not only understand his “graphic poetry”. In fact, Kithaka, the real Swahili expert, delves into language experiment at the formal level, sometimes undermining the meaning of verse itself. For instance, in the verse “Amba”, which talks about a severe and greedy crocodile, the author is listing all the possible words with the rhyme “-amba” (crocodile – *mamba*, field – *shamba*, what – *kwamba*, decorate – *pamba*), which he weaves in one text (as if one puts together beads of different size to make a necklace), and they gain new perception, nonsense becomes sense.

*Natangaza kwamba
Huyu mamba
Ndiye mwamba
Unaoharibu shamba*

“Amba” (Mberia 1997)

The experiment plays the key role in Mberia’s poetry. But it is not only the experiment itself. For instance, in the verse “Another continent”, the poet doubles word stems, so that the verse acquires a special melodiousness which is already a means of imagery:

*Ewe bara jipya
Nyota unayemwesamwesa
Katika majira ya gizagiza
Nyota unayemetameta
Kama uhai unaopwitapwita...*

“Another continent” (Mberia 2001)

We meet an experiment with rhyme, a connection of words, which are like a string of beads, a play of words in the verse “Siku chungu”. Here words heap up one above the other, united by rhyme. The sense becomes almost unfathomable and it may be ruined if one tries to find it:

*Naterereka, nateseka
Katika mkondo wa miongo
Wa ndoto zisizo kikomo
Ambamo, bila maliwazo, mawazo
Yanapigwa kumbo bila umbo
Na mawimbi jahili
Ya bahari ya shari*

“Siku chungu” (Mberia 1997)

And vice versa, where form dominates, the sense becomes plain and visible like in all Mberia’s “graphic” verses:

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nyumba
hii ambayo
ilifumbwa kwa
mawe yaliyoumbwa
na maumbile,
mawe ambayo
yalisongwa na
maskini, nyumba
hii ambayo
ilisimamishwa kwa
saruji itokanayo
na viungo
vya ardhi vilivyochimbwa na
yahe, nyumba
hii iliyoezekwa
vigae vitokanavyo
na udongo
kimano tuliourithi
kutoka mama,
nyumba hii
iliyopambwa kwa vioo vilivyotengenezwa na
matambara, kwa nini wasistarehe katika nyumba
hii wale ambao misuli yao iliipa uhai?

“Nyumba” (Mberia 1997)

“Modernists” like Kezilahabi and Mberia, but also Alamin Mazrui, Mugyabuso Mulokozi and some others who reject a strict Swahili poetic canon offered their own conception of poetic language. But along with traditional and “modernistic” schools there exists a third trend of Swahili poetry – it is that sort of versification, which one may call “transitional”. In general it looks like pure “modernism”, where at first sight one cannot see even the faintest resemblance with the traditional canon, but the more careful search makes it obvious that there is a true continuity between traditional and contemporary art. The best examples of such transformation are the poems of two prominent figures of contemporary Swahili poetry, the Tanzanians Theobald Mvungi and Said Ahmed Mohamed (who is also known as an outstanding Swahili novelist and playwright). Both authors do not fully reject traditional poetry but they try to modernize it, refresh it thematically and formally, reforming traditional prosody (*vina, mizani*), playing with *kikomo* etc.

Though Mvungi follows traditionalism in almost all his verses it becomes obvious that the author tries formally to renovate old Swahili poetry. He sometimes “handles” its canons

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freely, changing the quantity of syllables in a line, sometimes simply ignoring the meter. Thus, the verse “*Tishio la binadamu*” is a real *shairi* with all its visual attributes, except the *kikomo*, which is not the same in each strophe:

Ex. 3 *Sa-sa ya-li-vyo ma-i-sha? / Sa-wa m-ku-ki mo-yo-ni*
Du-ni n-zi-ma ya-ti-sha, / ba-ra na ba-ha-ri-ni
Ta-ma-a ya-tu-ka-ti-sha, / du-ni-a i ma-sha-ka-ni
Vi-ta ku-u vya nu-ki-a, / ti-shi-o la bi-na-da-mu.

Mashindano ya sila-ha, yamekuwa ni mche-zo
Wakubwa waona ra-ha, kwa silaha waunda-zo,
Mabomu yaso na si-ha, ndiyo yawapa uwe-zo,
Urusi na Marika-ni, dunia mwaipa a-dha.

Dunia yaogele-a, kwenye bahari nja-a,
Silaha mwajichonge-a, suluhu mwaikata-a,
Nyie mwaleta udhi-a, maisha mwayapa sa-a,
Tabia za mkata-o, zaiharibu duni-a.

Kuyasujudu maba-vu, mwadai tusilota-ka,
Maoni yetu chaka-vu, sawa nguo ya mia-ka,
Ni pengi penye mako-vu, nchi zilivyopasu-ka,
Mabomu yatekele-za, waundaji mwafura-hi!

“*Tishio la binadamu*” (Mvungi 1985)

The verse “*Shairi la udongoni*” is written in form of an *utendi*: the author keeps the 8-syllable-*mizani*, *vina* but the *kikomo* is not the same again, but such small deviations are rather common even among traditionalists such as Amri Abedi and Andanenga:

Ex. 4 *‘Me-ni-tu-nu-ku sha-i-ri,*
Mi-mi na-o-na fa-ha-ri,
Sha-i-ri ta-mu na shwa-ri,
O-fi-si-ni ‘ka-li-ku-ta...

Shairi hili mwana-na,
Linanikamata sa-na,
Lasema mambo ya ja-na,
Kwa sifa na shangili-o.

Lanikumbusha waji-bu,
Kujenga si kuhari-bu
Naahidi kujari-bu
Kulinda nilichoje-nga...

“*Shairi la udongoni*” (Mvungi 1985)

In his other verses we may trace gradual deviation from the canon. For instance in his verse “*Chini ya mti mkavu*” Mvungi sometimes tries to follow the *mizani*, to keep *vina*, but unevenness of emotional effort, irregularity of accents start to dictate their own canons, as if the author had no power over his personal creative work, which formally is left on its own: The quantity of syllables remains the same but the rhythm differs from time to time, becoming more and more quick, even abrupt:

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Ex. 5

Twa-ji-la-mba mi-do-mo- ni ,	
<i>Ha-tu-na-cho cha tu-mbo-</i> ni ,	
<i>U-ti-i u-me-tu-po-</i> nza ,	intensification of rhythm
<i>La-i-ti tu-nge-li-ju-a.</i>	intensification of rhythm

"Chini ya mti mkavu" (Mvungi 1985)

In a parable verse, called “*Chatu na Kuku*” (which is an allegoric reflection about the reasons of African misfortunes during the colonial period) Mvungi sticks to a folkloristic style defined by a melodiousness of verse and a specific character of narration which is normally associated with folk tales (thus for instance he sometimes uses the narrative verbal morpheme *-ka-* instead of a specific temporal morpheme, as e.g. in ex.7):

Ex.6 *Kuku akimkuta pa-**nya**,
Anamkonyeza cha-**tu**
Chatu apata kitowe-**o***

*Chatu akikuta matun-**da**,
Au hata punda ya nafa-**ka**,
Amwelekeza ku-**ku**,
Kuku anafai-**di**.*

“Chini ya mti mkavu” (Mvungi 1985)

Only by the end it seems that Mvungi tries to reestablish a connection to the canon, (though the quantity of syllables is not always permanent) and to keep *vina*:

Ex.7 *Pa-ku a-ka-pa-ta a-ki-li,* 9 syllables
Ki-bu-ri a-ka-a-cha m-ba-li, 10 syllables
A-ka-ku-ba-li ha-li, 7 syllables
I-li a-po-nye u-ha-i 8 syllables

Because of the shortening of the number of syllables in the 3rd and the 4th line the rhythm of the strophe quickens and becomes even abrupt. The final “i” formally performs the function of *kikomo*, but it is consonant to “li” (not according to strict Swahili rhyming rules) and this euphony demonstrates how Mvungi’s poetry at a certain stage starts to live on its own. It starts to flow according to its personal immanent rules of poetry that differ from artificially created canons of versification. Here one may observe the main mechanism of transformation of traditional verse in Mvungi’s poetry – thus once the poet let the verse have its freedom, it may uncover its own poetic sacred and secret rule.

In the verse “*Ušionje asali*” the poet neglects the 4-line strophe, *kikomo* and *vina*. Instead he introduces a different rhyme – the final syllable of almost each line is repeated. Each line consists of 8 syllables.

Ex.8. *We bwa-na hu-o u-chu-mba,
Ka-ma jo-go-o na-te-mba
U-chu-mba u-si-o nyu-mba,
Ni sa-wa ku-ku na ka-mba,
A-u ku-kwe-a m-go-mba,
Wa-da-nga-nya kwa ku-vi-mba,
M-ti u-so-fa-a nyu-mba.*

“Usionje asali” (Mvungi 1985)

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In the verse “*Chungu tamu*” one may see another type of rhyme and it also differs from a traditional pattern. The rhyme pattern is aabbcc.

Ex.9	<i>‘Me-ku-mbu-sha pi-a ma-tu-ma-i-ni</i>	a
	<i>Ya wa-le wa-li-o chi-ni</i>	a
	<i>Wa-vu-ja ja-sho la zi-a-da</i>	b
	<i>Na ku-nyi-ma fa-i-da</i>	b
	<i>Ni-a ya ku-je-nga u-sha-i-ri,</i>	c
	<i>U-we na m-vu-to ma-hi-ri...</i>	c

“*Chungu tamu*” (Mvungi 1985)

It seems as if Mvungi knowingly experiments with traditional verse, keeping allusions to the presence of the canon. But he commonly neglects some significant attributes (or even plays with them) and invents his personal rhythm and rhyme, so that a verse becomes lively, vivid and free.

In Mvungi’s poetry phonic elements are more important than the equal quantity of syllables in a line and all the principal elements of the traditional structure. This phonic principal becomes the most important in Mvungi’s poetry and not only as epiphora as it is in his “*Shairi la udongoni*”:

Ex.10	<i>mwanána</i>	<i>wajibu</i>
	<i>sána</i>	<i>kuharibu</i>
	<i>jána</i>	<i>kujaribu,</i>

Mvungi masterly uses such phonic methods as alliteration and assonance (eg., use of sonants - *Linanikamata sana / Lasema mambo ya jana*). Certainly, these phonic elements are also familiar to traditionalists but in Mvungi’s poetry this consonance of last syllables starts to look more and more spontaneous, natural. We may trace such natural consonance in his verse “*Wasia*”, where the true harmony of Mvungi’s verse is based on evident or hidden consonance of sounds and not on the simple copying of last syllables or the use of a simple rhyme (like “*sana-jana*”, “*kuharibu-kujaribu*” as in the abovementioned “*Shairi la udongoni*”):

Ex.11	<i>Kwisha kuniweka chíni,</i>
	<i>Udongo kisha fukía,</i>
	<i>Na nyimbo niibiéni,</i>
	<i>Kwa Mungu kuniombéa...</i>

“*Wasia*” (Mvungi 1985)

This sudden rhyme is created by stressed syllables (*chí* and *kí, é*). Here we can see the rhyme, which is rather far from being traditional. Instead of regular Swahili aaab the author uses the westernized structure abab.

And Mvungi’s verses demonstrate how today the concept of Swahili poetry as a work of art changes, the concept of the very aesthetics changes. Formally Mvungi’s poetry is transitional, and if there are traditional verses Mvungi tries to renovate them somehow, though his “*Mashairi ya chekacheka*” are written according to traditional conventions.

The most striking example of renovation of traditional Swahili poetry is the poetry of Said Ahmed Mohamed, the famous Zanzibarian poet, prose writer, playwright and specialist in the

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study of Swahili literature. His method of renovation differs from the one of Mvungi. Mohamed renovates traditional verse, modernizing it more and more. Thus in his verse “*Rangi hii*” Mohamed transforms a traditional *shairi*, by keeping 8-syllable *kipande* with following caesura and identical final syllables in the first and the third lines; the second and the forth lines consist of trisyllabic repetitions, which do not show any resemblance with classic form. Besides there is evident experiment with the structure: parted lines, repeated refrain, play with words “ni” and “si”:

Ex.12	Ha-ta i-we ny-we-le za- o / ka-tu ha-wa-ji-chu-nu- wi	17 syllables
	si mno	
	Pi-a ya-we ma-cho ya- o / ka-tu ha-wa-ji-po-fu- wi	16 syllables
	si mno	
	M-no ni ra- ngi ya mwi- <u>li</u>	8 syllables
	Ujinga huu ‘meneya	Mashariki Magharibi
		ni mno
	Weusi wajitamaniya	Na kasha wausibabi
		ni mno
	Mno si rangi ya mwili	

“*Rangi hii*” (Mohamed 1984)

At first sight here we may see full renovation, the true revolution of Swahili verse. But if we look at it more carefully we may trace a kind of transformation of classical *mashairi*. The change is exemplified by the two stanzas given above. Suppose, each stanza consists of 5 lines, then the 5th one (“*mno ni rangi ya mwili*” and “*mno si rangi ya mwili*”) of these two abovementioned stanzas are almost the same, the part of the stem “*li*” (here underlined) plays the role of *kikomo*. This example shows clearly other traces of tradition: the marked caesura, which seems to divide into two *vipande*; the rhyming syllables “*wi*” (in *hawajichunuwi* and *hawajipofuwi*), “*bi*” (in *Magharibi* and *wausibabi*), “*o*” (in *zao* and *yao*) resemble *vina*. Only the refrains “*si mno*”, “*ni mno*” actually make the verse look modern. But here again we may see the trace of tradition, if we suppose that “*si mno*” of the second and the forth line of the first stanza (as well as “*ni mno*” of the second one) are just parts of “truncated” *mstari*.

In the verse “*U wapi mpaka?*” one can also see the presence of the canon, a distant reminder of tradition. This notional balancing between canon and innovation gets broken in favour of the latter – the advantage is evidently on the side of the new form. At first sight the verse is modern and has nothing in common with traditional forms of Swahili versification: one line can be a half-line longer compared to the next one.

Ex 13.	Ba-i-na ya ku-o-na na ku-to-o- na	12 syllables
	u wa-pi m-pa- ka?	6 syllables
	Ba-i-na la ma-a-na na li-so ma-a- na	12 syllables
	u wa-pi m-pa- ka?	6 syllables

“*U wapi mpaka?*” (Mohamed 1984)

But here in the quite modernistic form one may also trace tradition, because the very verse looks like a cut part of a *shairi* so that the refrain “*u wapi mpaka*” appears like an incomplete *shairi*. It could be the second *kipande* of a whole *mstari* (it seems as if the first one was lost on

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purpose, as the “refrain” begins with small letters, like e.g. in “*si mno*”, “*ni mno*” in “*Rangi hii*”) – a *kipande*, which was traditionally repeated in adjacent strophes of classic *shairi*; hence the uncommonness of strophe structure, which consists of two lines without traditional metre. The verse looks as if the author forgot to write another part of the second and the fourth line. The same thing holds in the previous verse “*Rangi hii*” which also looks as if it was not finished.

Another brilliant example of Mohamed’s transformation of traditional Swahili verse is the verse “*Pavumapo palilie*”. Here in order to stress a central notion the author turns it into an individual line-*mstari*. Mohamed imposes such “vivisection” onto the traditional *shairi*, breaking the strophe-*ubeti* by separating the single word “*Jua*”:

Ex.14. *U-chi-pu-ka-po m-me-a / 'ka-na-wi-ri ma-ri-da-di*
U-ti-li-wa-po m-bo-le-a / na ma-ji ya ma-ka-su-di
U-ja-po ku-nyo-ng'o-nye-a / u-si-pa-te ku-ji-ru-di
Ju-a,
Pa-vu-ma-po pa-li-li-e / si ka-zi ku-da-mi-ri-ka!
“Pavumapo palilie” (Mohamed 1984)

Thus, we may suppose there is not only play of words, but also of forms (structure). There are many verses like the above mentioned in Mohamed’s anthologies of poetry. It seems as if Mohamed was not satisfied with the form of traditional Swahili poetry. So in order to pass his thought on to the reader he cuts *shairi* and plays with the structure and with words too.

In his verse “*Uteto*” he reflects upon traditional poetry and culture commenting on it by recurring to a specific form. The form is again connected with the canon. It is a humpty-dumpty (palindrome) verse – we may look at it this way or that the other, we may just look at the verse by taking it as a single whole or by considering divided parts of it. The base of the verse is some sort of column, and the strophe is divided into columns (which is uncommon in traditional form):

1	2	3	4
<i>Sendi,</i>	<i>sirudi</i>	<i>sendi</i>	<i>nimekita kwa hamasa</i>
<i>Tendi,</i>	<i>baidi</i>	<i>tendi</i>	<i>kwa mbali ninazipasa</i>
<i>Fundi</i>	<i>shahidi</i>	<i>fundi</i>	<i>naviwiza vyao visa!</i>

“Uteto” (Mohamed 2002)

Here it seems as if the author wanted to demonstrate different kinds of traditional *vina* or even as if he wanted to teach the reader how to write traditional Swahili verses. The columns on the one hand represent variants of rhyming words (column 1, 2, 3) and phrases (column 4), on the other hand, the author invents his own type of versification built on traditional verse (though one cannot fail to see similarity with *ukawafi* – for more details see Wamitila 2003). Knowing its laws of construction, he contrives something new. In some of Mohamed’s verses the presence of the canon begins less evident, but we can always trace the elements of tradition:

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